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Lecture Delivered by
George F. Kennan
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President Dickey, Gentlemen. I wasn't personally too happy when I read in the letter the subject that I was going to talk about here. Not because it isn't a very good subject. It is. I think it is perfectly right that it should be at the beginning of this semester. After all, we had in this country a sort of a dizzy rise to national maturity and it has thrust upon us in the course of five or six years a lot of responsibilities of such scope and such complexity that I don't think anybody ever really knew before. It has plunged us into a sort of a stream of action in foreign affairs, which is so vast and so variegated that even to attempt to keep up with it by reading The New York Times or the telegrams of the State Department is a full time job alone.

I think it is no wonder in these circumstances that people feel a little uncomfortable as they watch their own government spin around in this vortex of activity for which neither their traditions nor their experience has prepared them very well. I think it is no wonder that they are filled with a sort of an uneasy questioning as to whether their own government really knows where it is going and what it is after--whether it is not just drifting on what looks to them to be a very confused and heavy sea. And for that reason I think it is perfectly right that a section of a course devoted to great issues as they affect the international position of this country should begin with a discussion of United States objectives.

The reason I wasn't too pleased about it is that it is the hardest subject I know to talk about. And I have to rack my brains to know just what I can say to you about it that would be most useful. Now it's not that it is hard to whip together some sort of a statement or structure of thought that would perhaps outwardly meet this demand. You can do almost anything with words. The sophists of all the ages have proven that.

I could tell you, if I wanted to make things easier for myself and for yourselves, that we really have two basic objectives of foreign policy in this country; that one of them is the assurance of the national security, that is, the creation of a set of conditions in the world which would make it possible for us to live out our lives here at home without any hostile interference; and that the second is what we might call the development and enrichment of international associations; the pursuit of a world order that would make it a little easier for every country to give what it has to offer to the general advance of civilization and to get the maximum benefits out of what other people have got to give.

And I could add to that that most of these spectacular things we are doing today; the things that make the headlines in the newspapers, actually relate to the first of those objectives, to the assurance of the national security; that this would include, for example, our attempt to keep the Russians out of the strategically vital parts of the world, to keep them out of western Europe and the middle East, and to persuade them that in the long run it would be easier and wiser for them to get out of eastern Europe as well and to leave the peoples there to lead their own lives. I think I could say that a lot of what we hope to accomplish through the United Nations and through international organizations really relates to the second of those objectives, but for the time being it has to yield precedence to the accomplishment of the first because if this nation loses its strength, or loses its national security, it can't do anything at all to create a better world.

Now all that, which has been said before in Washington, would not be wrong, and it would not be dishonest on my part to say it to you. It is sometimes useful as a sort of slide rule for people whose preoccupation with these matters is casual and superficial. But if we are really aiming here at getting at great issues in the literal sense of the word, I think we have got to be sterner and more rigorous with ourselves in thinking about this subject than that simple explanation would imply. I don't think we can slide into the subject from any such easy angle or we will slide off it again, at an equally easy and painless tangent. So I am going to go into it, if I may, a little more deeply.

Now all analyses unfortunately seem to begin with definitions of words. And how about this word "objectives?" Can it properly be applied at all to what a democratic country thinks and does? There are several things that lead me to doubt that. In the first place, the very word itself implies that there is some person, or some group of persons, who is qualified to determine what those objectives are. But is there? The President of the United States is charged by our Constitution with the conduct of foreign relations. But, all the party platforms notwithstanding, he doesn't receive any very specific mandates from the people on this subject. "Well," you can say, "he can use his own judgment. That's what people elected him for." But can he really? His course is cut out for him, or very much modified at every turn, by what he thinks public opinion will stand in this country. And whenever he needs funds, or needs to undertake any binding commitments on behalf of this country, he has to turn to Congress.

It is plain, then, that any concept of U.S. objectives would have to emerge jointly from the President, and Congress, and from the public, and it would have to be in some way formalized. But all three of these--President and Congress and the public--are changing quantities. The President may not be a changing quantity as often as a lot of people would like to have him, but he changes eventually in any case; and for that reason there is a constant sort of flux between them and it is clear that there could not be any final and formal agreement between them on anything like fixed objectives of foreign policy.

Secondly, the term "objective" seems to me to denote something concrete and final. It implies a point, somewhere along your future course of action, where you can stop and say, "Now I have finally achieved what I was after." But, gentlemen, the course of foreign affairs, of the conduct of foreign affairs by a great government doesn't have any road marks of that sort. It deals in a dynamic environment and not in a static one. And there is nothing that is more important to bear in mind than that when you think about it. The medium in which it operates, the medium of international life, is one of vast and subtle and unceasing change. Its problems are never the same two days in a row. There are not happy endings after which everyone walks out of the movie theater and goes home. It's like woman's work, the work of the policy-maker is never done. It starts all over again every morning. And in contrast to individual life, not even death is final because countries rarely die, they sort of renew themselves. There can accordingly be no real concept of the goal, or the objective of foreign policy, there can only be room for the concept of the direction in which you are moving. You can never determine where you are going to get. You are lucky if you know the direction you are going in.

Finally, the term "objective" seems also to imply something separate and distinct from method. But I would question here (and here I am touching an issue which I would really call a great one in the truest sense of the word) whether you can speak of objective as something distinct from method. One of the deepest lessons that many of us who served in Moscow thought we learned from our service there was that the end does not really justify the means, nor is the end independent of the means. But that the means that you use actually determines in a large measure the end that you come to; and that you therefore cannot, as the dictatorships thought they could, pick any means that you thought might be suitable to the purpose, regardless of their ethical value, and apply them and then forget about them. It just doesn't work that way. I don't think that you ever can achieve wholly good ends by a series of bad means. And I think the converse is probably equally true. The dictatorships, I think, are going to learn this some day; some of them already have to their own consternation. In any case, Christianity has known it for centuries, and the people of a democratic state seem to have an instinctive knowledge of it. They are more apt to bind the hands of their government in matters of method than they are in matters of aim. And the direction in which a democratic government proceeds is determined in large part by the methods to which it is bound by public opinion and tradition.

Now if these considerations have the force to you that they seem to have to me, I don't think we can really use the word "objective" with regard to the foreign policy of a democratic state. Does this mean then that there is no guiding element in the conduct of foreign policy in a country like ours? Does it mean that we are condemned simply to drift along in the cross-currents of world events as they impinge themselves on the traditions and ideas of our people?

I don't think it does. We have already seen that if there are no finite goals in a democratic foreign policy, there is at least direction. We have seen that if there isn't an end, there is at least method; and that method is one of the determinants of the end. I think, therefore, that there is a guiding element in United States foreign policy; but that this guiding element lies in something deeper and less two-dimensional than the simple question of, "What are we after?"

It lies, really, in our own concept of ourselves in relation to our world environment. It lies in the way we picture to ourselves our own personality as a nation, and the nature of the world around us, and our function as a member of the international community. It lies, if you will, in the way we cast ourselves, as one of the actors, in the drama of world history.

Now I don't need to describe to you here the whole spectrum of attitudes that Americans have toward this question of what sort of a country we are and what we ought to be doing. You will find them in newspapers and in magazines and on the radio waves. You will hear them in conversations. I think many of you have tried to catalogue them and list them in the course of your work here on foreign policy matters.

By and large, I think those attitudes do a lot of credit to our national character. Most of them rest on a good-naturedness, fair-mindedness, generosity which I don't think you would find actually anywhere else in the world. And by and large, they are characterized by a sense of responsibility which, in the case of the other world powers who have gone before us, came only after centuries of experience and then came only to a very few people who were born and trained to the exercise of power.

Now to me, all this is a source of pride and satisfaction. And yet I think that these same attitudes contain some very dangerous deficiencies which we are going to have to overcome before we can ever get down to a basis of firmness and realism, of understanding in our thinking about international problems. And these deficiencies seem to me to stem from two things: First from a sort of a wishful picture of our world environment, what you might call an anthropomorphic picture, a picture of the rest of the world as being like ourselves and not like what it really is; and, secondly, an overconfident and idealized concept of our own American society, a concept which exaggerates the significance of the material progress we've made and under-rates the power of spiritual and intellectual values; a concept which pays too much attention to what we are today and too little attention to what we are becoming; a concept that takes us out of the real context of change and development, in which our lives actually must proceed, and puts us, like a sort of a smug and self-righteous ancestor portrait, into an imposing framework in which we are apparently supposed to hang indefinitely and be admired by the coming generations below.

Now because I think these are the deficiencies of our approach to foreign affairs, and because I think you are going to find these questions popping up pretty frequently in the work of this coming section of the Great Issues course, I want to point out to you what I believe to be certain basic realities of our world environment and of ourselves which, if we keep clearly before us, would keep us from wandering into certain paths of unreality to which I think we are peculiarly prone as a sort of a national weakness, and which are really pernicious to any sound development of our international relations.

Now first of all, with respect to the world environment, let's remember that a large percentage of the peoples of this earth live in a state of poverty and misery and ignorance which leaves no room at all, or very little, for the liberal ideas which we nurture and bandy about among ourselves here in this country. The great mass of these people in, I would say, probably the majority of the countries, are despotically governed to one degree or another. Of course, all that is relative. It has been said that all government is a conspiracy. And I think that is true. It's only a question of degree. But still in a large part of the world that conspiracy goes to a point where you can really say that how nations behave in international society is not so much a question of what the people themselves think, as a question of what the governing circles think who run them.

Now in many instances, these governing circles are not devoted to peace, as we conceive that devotion here. Their peoples may yearn for peace in many instances--I think most of the European peoples do, for example--but for many of them peace is not an ultimate value. And, above all, it is not an abstraction. I think that is one of the greatest weaknesses of our thought here; is the treatment of the questions of peace and war as abstractions without any context. It is never a question of "whether peace?" it is a question of "what peace?"--peace on what terms? peace in whose interests? Most people want peace--yes. But there is usually something that they want more than peace, power or the internal security of their own particular government, or the satisfaction of particular hatreds or resentments or envies that they have got, perhaps even national pride and self-respect. Because these things are not always compatible.

I think we should beware, therefore, of viewing world society as a group of well-wishing peoples, yearning for peace in the abstract and waiting only for us to come along and suggest some sort of a juridical framework in which that yearning for peace could be channeled and in which it could find expression. I think we ought at least admit the theoretical possibility that for a long time to come there may continue to be instances, as there have been in our own history, in which differences may not, with the best of will, be susceptible of juridical settlement, in which violence may actually be preferable to non-violence in the eyes of many people, and in which our role may have to be not to try to ban violence entirely from the face of the earth but to channel it into the directions which are least dangerous to world stability and to our own national security.

And let us not delude ourselves into the comforting hallucination that basically the movement of events in the world is toward a more stable world society or a more kindly atmosphere of international relations at this time. Never forget what a revolution has taken place in world population movement within the past century. I am told that you have gone through a lot of this material. And I am very glad you have because it is absolutely basic to a judgment of our foreign policy. Remember that in a space of time which is only a moment compared to the whole span of human history, the population of this globe has suddenly and surprisingly doubled for reasons which I suppose we don't really fully understand and that this increase is still proceeding at a dizzy pace. Remember that this hasn't occurred because world resources have really suddenly increased. On the contrary, it has occurred against a background of continued and accelerating depletion of world resources. "Man," as William Vogt recently wrote, "is the only organism known that lives by destroying the environment indispensable to his survival."

In great areas of the earth's surface, population is already pushing against the ceiling of food supply. In many other areas, it is groping eagerly toward it. And once it reaches it, there seems to be no salvation, no solution that men know yet. The resultant poverty and squalor and depression of living standards tends to raise, rather than to lower, the birth-rate, and peoples find themselves hanging in a sort of insoluble deadlock between life and death, between recurring famines and recurring over-population. Now here, public health work is no solution, quite the contrary; and while science can increase the amount of food that people can squeeze temporarily out of the surface of the earth, I believe that the growth of population can keep up with it almost everywhere, and I would certainly lay my bets upon it as things stand today.

Now let's not blink these facts. Let's recognize that we are moving into a bitter crisis all over the world in the relation of population to food supply; that the earth's resources are shrinking while its population increases by leaps and bounds; that it is becoming an increasingly crowded planet, and that there is going to be a tendency for people to use their elbows and their teeth and their nails to try to get what they think is their share of the increasingly scarce fertility of the world. Let's remember that no one has yet found even a reasonably hopeful approach to this problem on a world scale; and that most of the measures taken to relieve world suffering are, from the standpoint of over-population, not from other standpoints but from this standpoint alone, palliatives which in many cases only aggravate the problem. And finally, let's remember what is perhaps the most important single fact in the whole pattern of our foreign policy: And that is that against this background of impending scarcity, we Americans already have over fifty percent of the world's wealth and six percent of its population. Now how long is the world going to be content with that proportion? And how long is the world going to be content with that proportion? And how long are we going to be able to defend a position that favored?

Now that brings us back to ourselves, and to our own country. Haven't we, at least here, found a rational answer to the relation between man and environment? Haven't we devised institutions which rule out violence in the social relationships between individuals and groups--institutions which could stand as a hope and as a guide, ideal, for the rest of the peoples--which could provide the basis of a genuine world leadership on our part?

I am not going to try to answer these questions for you. I'd rather that you would answer them for yourselves and when you get to the end of this course and not at the beginning of it. But I'd like you to look now at a few of the facts that affect those answers.

First of all, this same question of resources. Now there is no need for me to recite here the figures on the depletion of the natural resources in this country. You can look them up for yourselves if you haven't already heard them from this platform. Find out what's happening to our soil, to our forests, to our wild life, to our water levels, our rivers, our oil reserves, our iron ore. On many of these questions you'll find no agreed solutions, it is true. But about the general conclusion that you come up with, there can be no doubt. The fact is that we have geared our manner of life in the United States, not to process of balance with our own natural resources, but to a process of disbalance with it. That has long been the case. It seems to me that when I talk about this I can hear again the words that Lord Bryce used some 60 years ago in talking to the pioneers of the West when he was gathering the material for his great book on the United States. It was with great vision and earnestness that he appealed to those early American pioneers to understand the frivolity of their attitude toward the land the riches that they possessed.

"Gentlemen," he said, "why in heaven's name this haste? You have time enough. No enemy threatens you. No volcano will rise from beneath you. Ages and ages lie before you. Why sacrifice the present to the future, fancying that you will be happier when your fields teem with wealth and your cities with people? In Europe we have cities wealthier and more prosperous than yours, and we are not happy. You dream of your posterity; but your posterity will look back to yours as the golden age... Why hasten the advent of that threatening day when the vacant spaces of the continent shall all have been filled, and the poverty or discontent of the older states shall find no outlet?..."

Now we are close on that day that Bryce described. It is true, that more Americans are aware now than were then of the dangers he referred to. The very popularity of Western movies today I think is pretty eloquent testimony to the accuracy of his prophecy about how later generations would look to the days of the early frontier. But the restraint, the stability, the balance, the patience that he was appealing for have not yet been achieved; and until they have, I am afraid that we have got on our hands a growing crisis of our own in the relationship of people to the earth; and that a great question mark is going to continue to hang over the validity of those American institutions which we prize so highly and take so easily for granted.

And I am afraid this isn't the only question mark that is going to hang over them. These institutions, after all, are political institutions--a great many of our social patterns. They were devised for a relatively simple, agricultural society, a society just removed from the colonial stage, a society without any world responsibilities at all. There was no proof, no reason, in fact, to expect that they would automatically measure up to the complex inter-relationships of modern society. The young Frenchman, De Tocqueville, who visited this country in the 1830's, saw this reality, and he was so impressed with the United States that he found it hard to bear this one question mark in mind when he thought and wrote about this country:

"One has to return into one's self, struggle against the current," he wrote, "to perceive that such simple and logical institutions would not suit a great nation which needs a strong internal government and a fixed foreign policy."

And De Tocqueville didn't know the half of it. He couldn't foresee what profound changes industrialism and urbanism were some day going to bring into the American scene and what effect they were going to have on the traditional relationship of the individual to the social framework in which he has to live.

Now I am no sociologist. I can't describe these things to you with authority. But you have people here who can. And I would urge you never to think about foreign affairs without thinking about the changes which have been taking place in our manner of living--changes, again, which have occurred with great suddenness, for the most part within my lifetime, if not within yours--and which have really the deepest significance from the standpoint of our institutions and traditions.

I am thinking here, of course, of the changes caused by technological advances, by the automobile and the telephone, all the other things that have gone into the change in our lives; the disintegration of the basic social groups, the disintegration of the family and the local community; the increasing separation of life and work; the decay of the great cities; what Professor Lind, of Columbia, called "the fading meaning of citizenship to the urban dweller;" the increasing bewilderment and frustration of the average individual in the face of the complexity of American society; the growing passivity of all his recreations' forms--what one of your professors here today called "spectatoritis;" the tendency of Joe Zilch to pass the buck to some one higher up, to leave it to higher authority, to say "I don't understand this. Somebody else must," the tendency to look to some great white father for the answers--and all of that in the face of the fact that the political institutions of the United States don't provide any great white fathers, and that the people who have to run public affairs are, by and large, no wiser and no more sure of themselves than Joe Zilch himself.

Now all these things, gentlemen, seem to me to point to something obviously unfinished in American society, and to the maturing of another sort of a crisis; a very slow crisis (I would give it 50 years perhaps to come to its climax) but a very deep one--a crisis between our own traditional institutions and the ways of life into which we are being pressed. I think this is going to be a hard test of our national worth, probably the hardest we have ever faced since the Civil War. That was another thing that Bryce saw sixty years ago, and he described it as "looming on the horizon and now no longer distant, a time of mist and shadows, wherein dangers may lie concealed whose form and magnitude America can scarcely yet conjecture." Now that is really in its essence the test of national maturity, which we still have before us. And until we have passed it, I don't think we are going to know what sort of a nation we really are; I don't think we are going to know whether we have got the answers or whether we haven't; I don't think we are going to know how much we have really got to offer, and what it is we have got to offer to the world around us.

And I tell you these things because they seem to me to have a vital bearing--more vital than any other things I can think of--on this question of how we view ourselves in our world environment. If peace is not yet the basic aspiration of a lot of governments; if the world at large is still caught up in problems so vast that science hasn't yet even begun to approach them effectively; if humanity is entering into a sort of mortal deadlock between man's stubborn wastefulness and his equally stubborn fertility; if our own institutions cannot yet be regarded as something final; if we, too, haven't yet found the answer to the problem of man in his natural environment, the problem of the relationship of man to the resources that God gave him to live in and live from; if we ourselves still have to prove that we can make democracy work in terms of the machine age; then it seems to me that some very important conclusions have to be drawn from the standpoint of our function in international society.

I don't think these conclusions ought to be permitted to discourage us. Least of all should they be permitted to become an excuse for isolationism, for turning away from the problems of international life. There isn't any escape from our world position. We are in it for fair, whether we like it or not; we are in it by our strength; we are in it by our geographic position; and every day we are in it more deeply with the advance of military techniques and with the depletion of our own natural resources and our increasing dependence on others.

But there are certain things to which I think these conclusions do obligate us. Above all, they obligate us to a greater modesty and a greater humility in our estimate of ourselves. They obligate us to fight over-confidence like the plague. They obligate us to watch out for comfortable and grand catch-words like "world leadership" and "selling democracy" and "raising living standards everywhere." They obligate us not to let the term "world peace" become an abstract thing; but rather to insist upon looking at it in the context of practical realities. And finally, they obligate us

to bear in mind that foreign policy is not a glamorous form of escape from the unpleasantness of domestic problems, but that foreign policy begins at home. It begins with keeping the top-soil from sliding off these hills outside of Hanover here; it begins with clearing out the blight that is fastening on the big cities; it begins with finding democratic ways in which to channel the new leisure and the cash surpluses which are finding their way into the hands of people in this country into something more satisfying and more constructive than the slot machines and the television sets.

Now all this won't change a lot of what we are doing at the moment. We are going to go right on trying to hold on in Berlin. We are going to have to go on with the European Recovery Program; go on with a firm defense policy. It won't change anything in our obligations toward the United Nations. Most of those are defensive in nature. They are not really forward objectives of our own. They are things, with the exception of the United Nations, which have been forced upon us by circumstances. We can't help doing them.

But there are lots of things it should change. It should change some of the fancier ideas about what we think we might be going to do in Asia or in the areas of backward peoples. It should change some of our expectations, perhaps, about the pace at which we can achieve our purposes in world government or in the United Nations and in international association in general. It should help to cure our American tendency about taking sides in every and all controversies outside our borders, our tendency to divide everything into right and wrong, to find which is the side of the angels and to get on it ourselves and to try to get the majority of the world over onto that side. I think it ought to give cause for thought to those who think in terms of universal world government. And I think it ought really to give a jolt to the people who talk about this being the American century.

Because perhaps the greatest lesson that flows from these realities of world environment and domestic environment that I have talked about here is that at this stage of our history we are not yet really ready to lead the world to salvation. We have got to save ourselves first; and we have got to gain immensely in understanding; I would risk the prediction that if we forget this, if we try to regard the present as the peak of our national effort, if we set out today to organize the world according to our own concepts and to make it over in our own image, against the unfinished state of our own society, and against the background of our own spiritual and intellectual bewilderment, then the imprint that we leave on the world will be faint and transitory, and history will have no pages comparable to those which she has written about ancient Rome or the Britain of more modern times.

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But if we regard the present not as the end, but as the beginning of our national training in foreign policy, if we start right now, with all humbleness, at the bottom of the ladder, the way that any good team ought to start at the beginning of a football season, if we recognize that we have got before us the hardest climb that any country or any group of people ever had in the field of diplomacy in world history, then I think there is a possibility that we can do things that none of us will be ashamed of.

We won't achieve complete world peace, I think in our own lifetimes. I don't think we will teach all other men, or all other nations how to live in harmony with their natural environment. But we may some day do what no one yet has done; and that is to point the way in this direction. There is no real reason why we should not some day reach a point when we can say that our own resources are being rebuilt as fast as they are being consumed; that the individual understands his place in society, and understands the freedom in a democratic society exists only in self-restraint and responsibility; and that our society is so organized that it is adding steadily not only to the physical comforts of life but to the other values—to the beauty of life and to the sense of human enjoyment and fulfillment. Now when that day comes that we can say that I think we will really be able to turn in all seriousness to the question of our mission as a world power. Because we will then finally be able to say what we are not able to say today; that we have found a part for ourselves in the drama of world history which lives up to our traditions and our own ideas about ourselves. And when we have done that, I think we will have come as close to what you might call the objectives of American foreign policy as we could possibly come.
